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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews approaches that have been proven effective in preparing urban minority youth for college. Precollege programs that offer comprehensive approaches and combine a variety of services have the largest impact on college access for minority youth in low-income neighborhoods. The most effective programs are of substantial duration and focus on readiness rather than remediation. The key element of a college preparation program is its ability to provide students with the information and experiences necessary for postsecondary attainment. An effective program uses a variety of teaching strategies, including direct teaching in a variety of content areas, summer enrichment programs, individual and group counseling, tutoring, college visits and courses, peer and adult mentoring, and motivational speakers. Effective programs are characterized by academic support that includes pipeline courses, study skills and test preparation instruction, and high expectations. These programs also have social support components that incorporate parent involvement, peer support, cultural affirmation, and community involvement. Financial support, support for success in the college climate, and support in developing necessary competencies, especially social and cultural capital, are required, as well. Staff development is also an essential part of successful precollege programs. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE URBAN COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS

College preparation programs for minority youth living in low-income neighborhoods help them develop the skills, knowledge, confidence, and aspirations they need to enroll in higher education. Over time, the strategies for expanding the college access, attendance, and graduation rates of these youth have grown in complexity, as have the funding sources, which are now a mesh of support from the Federal and state governments, organizations, and colleges and universities. Although, both in extent of a program's services and in duration, long-term investments in students have a stronger impact than short-term interventions (Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 1999), program strategies leading to student success differ, based on the interests, needs, and resources of the student's local communities. Nevertheless, certain approaches have been proven effective in a variety of situations and can easily be customized for local contexts. This digest reviews these general approaches to help developers maximize the benefits which students derive from programs.

Program Organization

Range of Services

Pre-college programs that offer comprehensive approaches and combine a variety of services have the largest impact on college access for minority youth in low-income neighborhoods. Traditionally, however, programs have tended to focus on a specific type of service because of time, expertise, and funding constraints. Some programs, for example, specialize in test preparation (Princeton Review), counseling and academics (Liberty Partnerships Program), enrichment in a specialized subject (MESA), or learning based on cultural integrity (Neighborhood Academic Initiative). Others concentrate on providing a better education in general through systemic school change (Frederick Douglass Academy). Still others function only as supplemental school resource centers.

Program Duration

The most effective college preparation programs are of substantial duration and focus on "readiness" rather than "remediation" (Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997). They begin offering students services and information about college and financial aid as early as possible, certainly in time to influence the educational outcomes for the students. Most Federal and state programs require services to begin no later than the seventh grade and to continue through the twelfth grade, although challenges associated with inequitable academic preparation exist as early as the fourth grade (Nettles & Perna, 1997). Programs such as I Have A Dream (IHAD) start as early as the third grade.

Educational Strategies

The key element of a college preparation program is its ability to provide students with the information and experiences necessary for post-secondary attainment. An effective program uses a wide variety of teaching strategies to offer students different types of relevant experiences and to ensure learning, including the following: direct teaching in a variety of content areas, summer enrichment programs, individual and group counseling, tutoring, college visits and courses, peer and adult mentoring, and motivational speakers.

Types of Support

Academic Support

Effective programs provide students with rich academic content as well as other support to promote their intellectual development (Fashola & Slavin, 1997):

Pipeline Courses. These include algebra, geometry, calculus, biology, chemistry, and physics so that students gain the knowledge necessary for standardized testing; a transcript for a well-rounded, competitive college application; and the skills to succeed in college courses. Close monitoring of students' selection and successful completion of the courses should begin as early as junior high school.

Study Skills. Students need to master strategies to excel in these pipeline courses. Workshops and courses teach how to take notes, study, and complete homework assignments. Supportive networks, such as peer study groups and one-on-one tutoring, provide additional learning opportunities. Supplemental coursework adapted to students' particular learning needs augments existing curricula.

Test Preparation. Many students are now required to negotiate high school, college, state, and nationally-developed high stakes tests to ensure admittance to higher education. Thus, the most useful college preparation programs offer courses or workshops that focus exclusively on students' preparation for each required exam.

High Expectations. Finally, students in college preparation programs for minority youth in low-income neighborhoods, traditionally stigmatized as "at-risk," should be viewed as highly talented individuals who can achieve their goals. Thus, programs for them should be geared toward learning and achieving, and provide students with encouragement, understanding, and structural support.

Social Support

Parent Involvement. It has long been assumed that parent involvement is critical to program success and student achievement (Jun & Tierney, 1999). Horn and Chen (1998), for example, found that students whose parents discussed education goals with them went farther in post-secondary institutions than those who did not. Some programs, therefore, require parents to sign contracts agreeing to support their children's attendance, assist with homework, and follow through on necessary paperwork for college admission and financial aid. Programs may also invite parents to nonacademic performances or ask for assistance in raising funds or providing supplies.

Peer Support. The strongest social support strategy used by programs is the fostering of student community through opportunities for interaction in academic and nonacademic activities. Study groups provide a space for peer tutoring as well as encouragement in academic aspirations (Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 1999). Networking students who have graduated from the program and are currently enrolled in four-year institutions with program participants provides another important level of peer support.

Cultural Affirmation. For minority students from low-income neighborhoods, success in school and college aspirations are often

equated with a rejection of their identity and background (Deyhle, 1995). To prevent such an identity problem, programs use students' cultures and backgrounds—race, class, and gender—in a positive manner in their curricula, teaching methods, and learning activities (Jun & Tierney, 1999).

Community Involvement. Mentors, role models, community leaders, and speakers motivate students and raise their self-esteem, expectations, and sense of accountability. They help students realize that their college attendance is part of a community pattern, preceded by earlier college graduates and to be followed by others heeding their example.

Financial Support

Funding. Socioeconomic status is the greatest determinant of enrollment and persistence in college for all students. Financial resources not only affect a student's decision to attend college but also impact on the amount of time available for study after enrollment (Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 1999). Ideally, therefore, programs include direct financial aid such as full or partial scholarships, stipends for attendance, or book grants (Perna & Swail, in press).

Aid Application Process. Filling out financial aid packets and meeting deadlines for scholarships, loans, and grants are crucial for securing necessary funding for college. Simply making forms available and deadlines explicit is important, but programs which help families negotiate the mass of paperwork, including reproducing tax forms and preparing applications for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), Pell Grants, and scholarships tend to secure more funding for students.

Resource Procurement. Staff members of effective programs also actively seek additional avenues for student financial support. They explore sources such as local community grants, professional organizations, corporate sponsorships, and endowed private scholarships.

Support for Success in the College Climate

Admissions Process. Programs facilitate the admissions process for students by providing information about how to get into a college and how to assess whether a college is a good match culturally and financially. Successful programs teach students how to look critically at a university's student body and policies to determine its cultural milieu and how to ask tough questions about retention rates, financial aid, and the climate.

College Visits. Opportunities for students to participate in university life, programs, and resources are essential elements of college preparation programs (Fenske et al., 1997). Programs partnered with universities or colleges can offer summer enrichment programs enabling students to live and study on campus. College classrooms can be the site of an after-school program, a test preparation module, or an enrichment course. Students can utilize computer rooms, the library, and sports/exercise equipment on campus. Programs that cannot directly use higher education facilities can take students on college trips and to local college fairs and recruitment presentations.

Necessary Competencies

Social and Cultural Capital. Student differences in social and cultural capital create differences in college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (McDonough, 1997). Social capital for students preparing for college is the availability of information-sharing networks about college and financial aid. Cultural capital is the value placed on obtaining a college education, and the information available about the means of acquiring one (McDonough, 1997). Effective programs create this capital by teaching social norms, values, and expected behaviors necessary for college admittance and persistence.

Social Critique. In a society where inequities in college access still reflect racism, classism, and sexism, it is useful to assist students in understanding the realities of the social and economic stratification that impacts on college admittance. Students can be given opportunities not only to critique social structures, but also to be active agents in the fight against inequities.

Staff Development

The staff of a pre-college program is essential to its success. Effective programs provide staff members with continuous, in-depth professional development to keep them up-to-date on the following: high school-to-college transition issues, which are changing more rapidly than previously; high school graduation requirements; college admissions requirements; remediation policies; and student remediation options. Inservice training should also provide instruction in culturally responsive curricular and teaching strategies that are effective with their particular students (Knight & Oesterreich, in press).

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